News release

Towards a consensus on climate change

3 February 2005

How much more does the climate have to change before it becomes 'dangerous'?

This was one subject under discussion at the Met Office's Hadley Centre for Climate Prediction and Research in Exeter, where an international scientific symposium on climate change has now drawn to a close.

Themes debated during the three-day Avoiding Dangerous Climate Change conference ranged from the socio-economic effects of climate change to the vulnerability of eco-systems, but three areas in particular caught delegates' attention:

Antarctica awakens
Prof Chris Rapley CBE, Director of the British Antarctic Survey, presented new data-based results that cast further doubts on the stability of the West Antarctic ice sheet. He claimed that the melting of the ice shelves, such as Larsen B which has been continuously present since the last ice-age, may be leading to a speed up of some glaciers in a 'cork out of bottle' effect, and advised that these processes need to be incorporated in advanced ice-sheet models.

The flood of refugees
Papers presented by IPCC's Martin Parry, Yuri Izrael from the Institute of Global Climate and Ecology, and other speakers during the Impacts Overview session, illustrated from different perspectives that the consequences of climate change vary with scale, from global to community level, and between regions.

They claimed that as climate changes, societies will also be changing, and the flood of refugees out of some parts of the world could be significant. New technologies are likely to emerge, new discoveries will be made and population shifts are bound to occur. Forecasting such changes is extremely difficult but climate change impacts analyses must take into account changes to societies and how they will adapt.

Dennis Tirpak, Geoff Jenkins and Cinzia Losenno pull together the steering committee's report

Species extinction
John Lanchbery, from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, argued that, on the basis of ecological effects and the observed inability of some natural ecosystems to adapt, atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases can be considered to be already too high.

He pointed out alterations to species ranges, ecosystem loss and the unpredictability of subsequent impacts arising from changes in one key species. He highlighted work in the North Sea on seabird populations, and noted that climate impacts on plankton abundance may have resulted in a substantial reduction in sandeel numbers - a key feed species for many seabirds. This shortage has been independently indicated by Danish sandeel fisheries where 2003/4 catches were half the typical catch.

Organised by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), the conference set out to advance the scientific understanding of the long-term implications of climate change, the relevance of stabilisation goals and options to reach such goals. It also aimed to encourage research and international scientific debate on these issues.

At the close of the conference, Margaret Beckett, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, said: "I would like to say how very pleased I am with the way the conference has been organised by the Met Office, and the large presence of some of the most eminent climate change scientists from around the globe. I hope that this conference will be seen as a milestone in building international consensus on climate change."

Details of the speakers and papers being presented and the report of the steering committee can be found at the Avoiding Dangerous Climate Change Conference web site.

Download Avoiding dangerous climate change brochure (PDF, 889 kb)

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